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ABSTRACT

Three generations of children have passed through the Baton Rouge (Louisiana) school system since the "Brown" decision (1954) and one generation since the federal court's 1981 desegregation order. The impact of school desegregation on African American children was studied in the East Baton Rouge School District. For the student body as a whole, graduation rates have declined slightly, stabilizing at about 60%. African American graduation rates have ranged from 50 to 65% over the time period. African American students have been, and remain, far more likely to be suspended than any other race. About half the African American students attending district middle schools in 1992-93 received at least one suspension. African American students are disproportionately represented in district special education programs. Racial isolation is increasing in the schools, with predominantly white gifted and talented students in one set of classes and the general school population, largely African American, in another set of classes. Increasing amounts of human and financial resources are being poured into the district, but it is evident that conditions have not improved for African American students in Baton Rouge. Findings suggest that now is the time to reexamine the way African American students are being educated in Baton Rouge. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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by Richard Fossey

SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH: HOW HAVE THEY FARED IN DESEGREGATED SCHOOLS?

by Richard Fossey

Forty-one years ago, in Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court ordered an end to segregation in public education. Requiring African American children to attend racially isolated schools, the Court was convinced, generated feelings of inferiority that could last a lifetime. Although the effect of the decision was to end racial isolation in education, the underlying purpose was to improve life opportunities for African American children.

East Baton Rouge School District was not immediately affected by Brown. A desegregation suit was filed against the district in 1956, and desegregation efforts began thereafter; but it was not until 1981 that a federal district court issued a comprehensive order to desegregate Baton Rouge schools. This order required the district to begin busing school children to achieve better racial balance among its 100 school sites. This court order has been amended numerous times since 1981, but East Baton Rouge Parish School District still operates under the federal court's original mandate.

One generation of children has passed through the Baton Rouge school system since the federal court's 1981 order, and three generations have passed through it since Brown was decided. What has been the impact of these judicial efforts to improve educational opportunities for African Americans? Are African American children better off today than the African American children who attended Baton Rouge schools one or two generations ago?

On-Time Graduation Rates

An examination of long-term graduation rates in EBRP suggests that African American students are not faring better today than they did 40 years ago. In 1954, an African American 9th grader attending a Baton Rouge school had about one chance in two of graduating from high school on time. Only 55% of the African American 9th graders that year would graduate from Baton Rouge's segregated high schools in 1958. African American graduation rates improved in the 1960s and 1970s, reaching about 65% in the mid-1970s. But by 1990, those gains had been lost. Of the 2428 African American 9th graders who were enrolled the fall of 1990, only about half (1290 students) would graduate from a EBRP high school in 1994 (Table 1).

For the student body as a whole, graduation rates have declined slightly over 40 years. In 1954, 69.15% of Baton Rouge 9th graders (combined white and black) graduated with their classmates in 1958. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Baton Rouge graduation rate stayed fairly constant, ranging from 70 to 77%. From 1983 to 1985, the Baton Rouge graduation rate slipped to 58-59%. This drop occurred during increased desegregation activity in the courts, which probably prompted some middle class families to transfer their children out of the district. Baton Rouge's graduation rate climbed back to 73% in 1986 and then dropped to about 67% the following year. Since then, the graduation rate for a cohort of Baton Rouge 9th graders has stabilized in the 60% range, twice dropping below 60% (see Table 2).

Is the Baton Rouge School District doing a poorer job of retaining students now than in the 1970s? Probably not. Over a 40

year period, the district's on-time graduation rate for whites has ranged from 70 to 80% while the on-time graduation rate for African Americans has been in the 50-65% range. During this time, African American enrollments have increased as a percentage of overall enrollment, gradually bringing the district's overall on-time graduation rate down.

African American suspension rates*

Another way to gauge how African American students have fared since desegregation is to examine their school suspension rates. Research shows that suspensions seldom benefit the suspended child. Instead, they deprive already marginal students of educational time, making it more likely that such students will permanently drop out of school (Louisiana Department of Education, 1995). It is not surprising that high suspension rates are linked to high dropout rates.

On the other hand, school principals need to protect the learning environment from disruptive students. A high suspension rate may be a sign that principals are working hard to develop school climates where motivated students can learn. EBRP records show that principals usually suspend students for serious infractions, such as fighting, threats, and molestation of other students.

For the school population as a whole, EBRP suspension rates have been high since the late 1980s. In 1988-89, the district suspended 6,641 students. In 1989-90, the number was 6671. In 1990-91, 6,242 students were suspended from Baton Rouge schools. The following

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* I am indebted to Bennie McFarland, whose excellent paper on suspension and expulsion rates in East Baton Rouge Parish provided much of the data for this portion on the paper.

year, suspensions increased by about 10% to just under 7,000. In 1992-93, suspensions rose to 7,476.**

Very few students are removed from EBRP elementary schools. About 90% of the suspensions occur at the middle or high school level. In 1993-94, one out five high school students was suspended at least once, and one out of four middle school students was removed from school at least one time.

These figures represent the number of students suspended, not the number of suspensions. In 1992-93, 4,136 students were suspended from EBRP middle schools, but middle school suspensions totaled 8,929. In other words, on average, a middle school student who was suspended once during 1992-93 was suspended again before the school year ended.

African Americans are far more likely to be suspended from an EBRP school than any other race. Of the 8,929 middle school suspensions given during 1992-1993, 85% (7615 suspensions) were received by African Americans. In fact, there was almost one African American suspension for every African American middle-school student (7615 suspensions among 7759 students).

More than one out of three middle school students was suspended at least once in 1992-1993, but the rate for African Americans was probably twice that high. It is safe to say that about half of the African Americans who attended EBRP middle-schools during 1992-93 received at least one suspension.

** Suspension rates for 1991-92 and 1992-93 are taken from the 1993-94 EBRP progress profile report (1995). Other EBRP records show a higher number of suspensions for 1991-92 and 1992-93. According to those records, more than 8,000 students were suspended in each of those years.

African Americans receive the vast number of EBRP expulsions as well. Of the 361 EBRP middle school students who were expelled during 1992-93, 91% (329 students) were African Americans.

EBRP suspension rates were extraordinarily high during the early 1990s, even when compared to other urban districts. Among the Council of Great City School's 47 member districts, there was an average of 29 suspensions per 100 middle or junior high school students in 1992-93 (Council of the Great City Schools, 1994, p. 78). In EBRP, there were 8929 suspensions in a middle school population of 11,708--approximately 76 suspensions per 100 students.

Suspension rates have gone down dramatically during the last two school years, due to an emphasis on in-school interventions. Total suspensions dropped from about 16,025 in 1992-93 to 9,703 in 1993-94. However, it remains to be seen whether the use of in-school suspensions will have any effect on the school environment or student behavior.

African American participation in special education

Nationwide, minority students are more likely than white students to be placed in special education, where many fail to thrive. During the 1986-87 school year, black and Hispanic students comprised 30% of the school age population, but they comprised 35% of the students classified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED), 40% of the students classified as trainable mentally retarded (TMR), and 42% of all students classified as educable mentally retarded (EMR) (Gartner & Lipsky, 1989, p. 10).

For African American students, their disproportionate representation in special education is especially stark. African-Americans were only 16% of the total school enrollment in 1986-87, but they comprised 35% of the EMR students, 27% of the TMR students, and 27% of the SED students (ibid.). According to some studies, African-American children are twice as likely to be placed in special education as white children (Richardson, 1994).

In East Baton Rouge Parish, as in many of the nation's school systems, African Americans are over-represented in self-contained special education classes. In 1995, about 61% of the school population were African American students, but African Americans represented 78% of the self-contained special education students. Over a 20 year period, the percentage of African American students in self-contained special education classes has risen. In 1975, less than two out of every three special education students were African Americans. This year, more than three out of every four students in this category are African Americans. (see Table 3).

In all special education classifications, African American students are over-represented at every age level. In the elementary schools, 75% of the special education students are African Americans. In the middle schools, the figure is 82%. At the high school level, African Americans make up 75% of the special education enrollment (Pack, 1996a).

Increasing racial isolation for African Americans

Forty years after the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education, it is worth remembering that the decision's basic

goal was to eliminate the evil effects of racial isolation. It is discouraging then to find that Baton Rouge schools have become more racially isolated in the years since the federal district court's desegregation order, not less.

In 1981, the year of the court's order, EBRP schools were about 55% white and 45% African American. Since then, white student enrollment has steadily eroded, until today only about 39% of the school population is white. 1981 was the last year that white first graders outnumbered African American first graders in Baton Rouge schools. In that year, the district had about 2300 white first graders in the system and 2180 African American first graders. In October 1995, African American first graders outnumbered white first graders by almost two to one (3123 to 1568).

Moreover, white movement out of the elementary schools seems to be accelerating. In 1992, there were 2124 white first graders in Baton Rouge elementary schools. Three years later, their numbers declined by 26%. African American first-grade enrollment during remained steady during 1992-1995, hovering around 3,000.

In grades 7 through 12, whites outnumbered African American students for several years after the 1981 desegregation order, due partly to higher dropout rates for African Americans. In 1981, there were 16,251 white students in grades 7 through 12, and 11,776 African Americans. In 1990, however, African American enrollment in the upper grades surpassed white enrollment for the first time in the history of the school district. In October 1995, there were almost 14,000 African Americans in grades 7 through 12, and less than 11,000 white students.

These demographic shifts are reflected in the increasing number of single-race schools. In the early 1980s, only 13 of the school district's 100 schools were single-race schools (those in which 80% or more are of one race). In 1995, that number has climbed to 40 (Pack, 1996b). School officials project that the number of single-race schools will continue to increase until sometime early in the next century when for all practical purposes, EBRP school district will serve only African Americans.

Even these numbers understate racial isolation in EBRP schools. About 13% of the white school population are enrolled in gifted and talented classes, but for African Americans the figure is less than 2%. At the middle-school level, the disparity in white and black participation is even more stark. More than one out of five white middle-school students are in gifted and talented classrooms, while only one out of 50 African American students are gifted and talented participants.

In Baton Rouge, most gifted and talented programs operate out of self-contained classrooms in various designated schools (Pack, 1996c). In many instances, this practice gives a deceptive appearance of racial integration. At the school level, white and black enrollment appear fairly balanced; but at the classroom level, children are still largely segregated by race. The predominantly white gifted and talented students attend one set of classes, while the general school population--largely African American--go to different classrooms.

Increased human and financial resources

As we have seen, measured by several indicators, African American students are not faring well in East Baton Rouge schools, schools which have been under a court-imposed busing order for 14 years. These findings are particularly disturbing, in light of an ever-increasing financial investment in EBRP, stretching back more than 25 years.

EBRP's school spending history has been analyzed extensively by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). The district was one of 9 U. S. school districts chosen by EPI for a long-term study of school distrit spending patterns. In this study, EPI analyzed expenditure patterns in the 9 districts over a 25 year period--from 1967 to 1991. This report, released in 1995, shows a 53% increase in EBRP's budget during this 25 year period after adjustments were made for inflation (Rothstein & Miles, 1995, p. 83).

In nominal dollars (without adjustment for inflation), the increase is quite dramatic. In 1967, EBRP budget was less than $40 million. Twenty-five years later, the budget had grown to more than a quarter of a billion dollars for a school population that was substantially unchanged. Student enrollment in EBRP was about 60,000 in both 1967 and 1991.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from the EPI report is the fact that very little of EBRP's increasing financial investment went to regular education. Over the 25 years of the study, real spending in regular education went up only 15% (Rothstein & Miles, p. 37). Instead, most of the new money went to other programs--special education, in particular.

Most of the budget increase went to hiring more employees. Between 1967 and 1991, the total number of school employees grew by more than 70 percent, from 4416 to 7521 employees. The number of certified teachers grew by more than 50%, from 2483 in 1966-1967 to 3778 in 1990-1991. This is an increase of 1295 teachers to serve roughly the same number of children.

Nevertheless, although the number of teachers increased from 1967 to 1991, the number of certified teachers working in core academic areas increased very little. Instead, virtually all of the increase in the number of teachers went to special education, the introduction of a kindergarten classes, and implementation of remedial, bilingual, or other special programs.

In particular, there was an explosive growth in the number of special education teachers. In 1966-1967, EBRP had only a handful of special education teachers for its entire K-12 school population. By 1990, the number had increased to almost 650.

1990-1991 Special Education Teachers

Elementary	361
Middle school	125
High school	163
Total special education teachers	649

In addition, EBRP had no kindergarten teachers in 1966; by 1990 it had 244 kindergarten teachers. Other new categories of teachers include: gifted and talented, 194 teachers; 9 high school discipline teachers, 14 high school remedial teachers; 37 bilingual and ESL teachers, 7 in-school suspension elementary teachers; and 104 Chapter One and elementary remedial teachers. Added together, 1258 of

EBRP's 1990-1991 teachers were in job positions that either did not exist or had only a nominal number of employees in 1966. These new job positions account for almost all of the 1295 new teaching jobs.

. The number of transportation employees also increased substantially over the 25 year period, even though the school population remained relatively stable. In 1966-1967, the district had 329 bus drivers. By 1991, the number of bus drivers had more than doubled to 674. In addition, the district employed 107 bus aides in 1991, whereas it had employed none in 1966. Altogether, transportation employees grew from 362 to 821 over a 25 year period.

Undoubtedly, desegregation-related busing accounts for part of the growing number of transportation workers. In addition, a substantial number of the new transportation employees provide special education transportation, a service which did not exist in 1967. Finally, the city of Baton Rouge has grown over the years, requiring the district to transport children over a larger geographic area.

Graduation rates have already been discussed, but it is interesting to note that EBRP's on-time graduation rate declined from 73% percent to 62% during the 25-year period of the EPI study. Of course, minority enrollment in EBRP increased during this period, paralleling a rise in the number of at-risk students. These demographic changes probably account for much of the drop in the on-time graduation rate. Nevertheless, it is startling to find that the graduation rate did not improve during a period when EBRP's operating budget increased from less than $40 million to more than $250 million, and when a substantial investment was made in teachers' aides,

kindergarten teachers, special education, and programs for "at risk" children.

Conclusion

This paper examined how African American students have fared in EBRP schools in the years since desegregation. It is a preliminary analysis that looked at only a few measures--on-time graduation rates, recent school suspension rates, special education participation, and racial isolation Nevertheless, these measures indicate that conditions have not improved for African American students in Baton Rouge schools in spite of a growing investment in human and financial resources.

These measures should be reviewed with caution, especially EBRP's on-time graduation rates. Calculating the percentage of African American 9th graders who graduate on time is only a general indication of a school district's success, since not every student who leaves school between 9th grade and graduation is a dropout. Some transfer to other school districts or to private schools; and some leave school to participate in vocational and GED programs. The graduation rate for any one year can be skewed by an unusual number of students who transfer in or out of the district during the high school years.

Nevertheless, over the long-term a district's on-time graduation rate gives a rough approximation of the percentage of its students who successfully complete high school. EBRP's on-time graduation rate for African Americans--about 50%--is similar to graduation rates in other districts with large African American enrollments: New Orleans (Fossey & Garvin, 1995),Washington DC

(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1994) and New Jersey's urban districts (Burch, 1992). Like other urban districts with growing at-risk populations, EBRP's on-time graduation rate has slowly drifted down.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the record of escalating suspension rates for African American students during the early 1990s. In the middle schools, where suspension rates were highest, African American suspensions almost equaled African American enrollment during 1992-93, with each African American student running about a 50-50 chance of being suspended at least once.

Those rates have fallen since 1993, but it not clear whether the conditions that triggered such high suspension rates have improved. Principals in schools where suspension rates were highest would be good people to question on that subject.

This paper's findings are not conclusive on conditions in East Baton Rouge Parish schools, but they suggest that many African American students are not thriving. In spite of increased spending and a larger staff, on-time graduation rates for EBRP's African Americans remain low. African Americans are over-represented in self-contained special education settings; and, for a period at least, suspension rates for African Americans were quite high. A clear trend of increasing racial isolation appears to be accelerating.

In and of themselves, these findings do not provide enough information for plotting a new educational strategy. But they do suggest that now is a good time to re-examine the way African American students are being educated in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Finally, it should be emphasized that these findings are not a criticism of EBRP educators. Most of the disturbing indicators

discussed in this paper are also present in other urban districts. All over the United States, urban school leaders are searching for strategies to improve life opportunities for at-risk youth. So far, no panacea has been found. These findings should not be used as a criticism of efforts that have been made so far. Rather they are an indicator that something new must be tried.

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